



Final Response to "America's Flawed Afghanistan Strategy"

October 14, 2010 | Dr. Steven Metz

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MAJ Dvorscak's thoughtful letter makes a number of important and powerful points. In some cases, I suspect that I simply expressed my idea poorly or was limited by time constraints in the extent to which I could explain them. On others, though, we'll agree to disagree.

MAJ Dvorscak is exactly right that al Qaeda and the Taliban have very different objectives. But it is not me who fails to distinguish between them--it is U.S. strategy. The Obama strategy, like the Bush strategy, clearly states that the reason the U.S. is concerned with Afghanistan is because it might serve as an al Qaeda base. I simply pointed that out in my original essay.

Since the U.S. has not yet attempted to limit its military presence and to "simply fund the Afghan government and provide it with training and advice," I don't fully understand how that position can have been "proven wrong." Counterfactuals can neither be proven wrong or proven right.

Similarly, that al Qaeda has sanctuary and some sort of state support in Pakistan does not "prove" that the organization needs this to undertake global terrorism. As far as I know, many of the recent terrorist attacks by al Qaeda or affiliated groups did not require training or basing in Pakistan. I also would argue that the weakening of al Qaeda, which has taken place since September 11, 2001, had much more to do with improved intelligence, improved counterterrorism defenses, and cutting off the organization's money flow than with closing down its bases in Afghanistan.

Al Qaeda has shown that while it likes to have and may even need territory for a base, it is not dependent on any given piece of territory. When it lost Afghanistan, it moved to Pakistan. Being pressured there, it is rising in Yemen. If that is shut down, it will go elsewhere. Spending billions of dollars to deny it access to Afghanistan therefore is whack-a-mole at its worst. In the global conflict with al Qaeda and its allies, the United States needs to transcend the old and increasingly obsolete idea that controlling a given piece of territory is the key to strategic success. That may have been true for most of history, but no longer is.

On MAJ Dvorscak's statement that "... writing that al-Qaeda was able to plot terrorism from Afghanistan because the U.S. was unaware of the impending danger, is false," it is important to include the sentence from my essay AFTER the one quoted: "Had America known what was coming, it certainly would have rendered al Qaeda's Afghanistan bases useless even without a full scale invasion." Perhaps my phrasing was bad, but what I suggested was, that if the United States had known that al Qaeda was planning attacks of the magnitude of September 11, it would have acted differently. The Clinton administration thought that its limited actions against al Qaeda were in proportion to the threat. It was wrong. No future U.S. president is likely to make that mistake. Whether Pearl Harbor or September 11, America is hard to fool twice in the same way.

I believe the final sections of MAJ Dvorscak's essay actually support my key argument. He notes that the "huge paradigm shift" needed to consummate existing U.S. strategy in Afghanistan "will take generations." I fully agree. My overarching point is that the limited degree to which this will make America safer is not worth the strategic costs (meaning both money and blood directly expended, and opportunity costs). Any strategy is only worthwhile if the expected gains justify the expected costs and risks.

His closing statement, "Engaging warriors who have time in the sandbox may assist Dr. Metz in a broader, clearer understanding of the complex information environment that is a key element in the Afghanistan victory strategy," misses the point of my essay. Setting aside that I work daily with "warriors who have time in the sandbox," I contend that America's national strategy is flawed. History has shown that even the most superb operations by "warriors who have time in the sandbox" cannot compensate for a flawed grand strategy. Witness the Germans in World War II, or Napoleon.

The problem, as I see it, is not with the American troops or military leaders in Afghanistan, but in Washington. Perhaps if MAJ Dvorscak engages with the political leaders in Washington who make this national strategy, he will develop a clearer understanding.